

An Experimental Study of the L2 Acquisition of Spanish Differential Object Marking

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1. Introduction

In Spanish, some direct objects are preceded by the accusative case marker *a*, depending on semantic properties of the object, subject, and verb. This is an example of a phenomenon known as Differential Object Marking (DOM) (Bossong, 1985; Aissen, 2003). This paper presents a study of the acquisition of Spanish DOM by native English speakers who are advanced second-language (L2) learners of Spanish, in order to shed light on competing theories of L2 acquisition, in particular the Interpretability Hypothesis (Hawkins & Hattori, 2006; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007) and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2008, 2009; Hwang & Lardiere, 2013). The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces Spanish DOM, and summarizes previous studies on its acquisition. Section 3 describes the methodology of the study. Section 4 discusses the Interpretability Hypothesis and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, and the predictions they make for the results of the study. Section 5 presents the results of the study, and discusses their implications for the theories of L2 acquisition under consideration. Section 6 concludes.

2. Spanish Differential Object Marking

In the context of Spanish, Differential Object Marking refers to the presence of the accusative case marker *a* before some, but not all, direct objects. *A*-marking is affected primarily by semantic properties of the object, but also by properties of the subject and verb. As traditionally described, objects which are both animate and specific are *a*-marked, as shown in (1).

- (1) a. *Veo a María* / **Veo María*.
see-1SG DOM Mary/ see-1SG Mary
'I see Mary'
b. *Veo (*a) la mesa*
see-1SG (*DOM) the table
'I see the table'

In (1a), the direct object, *María*, is both animate and specific, so it must be *a*-marked. In (1b), the direct object is specific but not animate, so it cannot be *a*-marked. Similarly, animate but indefinite objects are *a*-marked only when they have a specific interpretation (2).

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- (2) a. *Necesito a un asistente*
 need-1SG DOM a assistant
 ‘I need an [specific] assistant’
 b. *Necesito un asistente*
 need-1SG a assistant.
 ‘I need a [non-specific] assistant’

However, Torrego (1998) and Zagana (2002) note that an animate but non-specific object can also be *a*-marked if the subject is agentive, as shown in (3):

- (3) *La enferma está llamando a una enfermera*
 the sick.woman is calling DOM a nurse
 ‘The sick woman is calling for a [non-specific] nurse’

Aktionsart properties of the verb have also been argued to influence *a*-marking. For example, von Heusinger and Kaiser (2007) argue that animate objects can be either specific or non-specific when it is *a*-marked, provided that the verb is telic:

- (4) *Juan halló (a) una niña en una canasta en su porche*
 Juan found [+telic] (DOM) a baby in a basket on his porch
 ‘Juan found a(specific/non-specific) baby in a basket on his porch’

Pretheoretically, then, the learning task for the L2 speaker is the following: L2 speakers must acquire the animacy requirement on DOM (that is, animacy of the object is a necessary condition for DOM). They must also acquire the specificity requirement on DOM: specificity of the object is typically required for DOM, but not always – a non-specific object can be *a*-marked, if the subject is agentive. (This last property may be more difficult to acquire, since it involves a feature of the subject influencing the realization of *a*-marking on the object.) We leave aside the telicity of the verb, since aspectual properties of the verb are not varied in the stimuli in the current study (only atelic verbs are used in the conditions reported here). The telicity of the verb was tested in separate conditions, which will be reported in a future paper.

There is a rich theoretical literature on Spanish DOM, but there are relatively few studies on its acquisition. In the realm of L1 acquisition, Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2008) used data from the CHILDES corpus to study how children acquire DOM, finding that the acquisition of DOM by monolingual children is virtually errorless. In the realm of acquisition by heritage speakers, there are several recent papers by Montrul and colleagues (Montrul & Bowles, 2009, 2010; Montrul & Sánchez-Walker, 2013; Montrul, 2014) with the overall finding that heritage Spanish speakers (aged 18-30) raised in the United States display incomplete, probabilistic knowledge of DOM, in particular the animacy and specificity requirements on DOM.

The only studies we are aware of on the adult L2 acquisition of DOM as such are by Guijarro-Fuentes and colleagues. Guijarro-Fuentes and Marinis (2007) found that L1 English learners of Spanish of various proficiency levels performed at chance on an acceptability judgment task. Guijarro-Fuentes (2011, 2012) found similar results, but found that advanced learners did approach convergence with L1 speakers on some conditions – in particular, advanced adult L2 learners appeared to have successfully acquired the animacy requirement, relative to other requirements. All three of these studies considered the animacy and specificity requirements, telicity of the verb, and human vs. non-human subjects, testing each property in isolation in separate conditions. The current study extends this line of research, but considers more fine-grained distinctions in the semantic properties which influence DOM by targeting different features that may trigger DOM as separate independent variables across two experiments. An important difference between the current study and the previous studies is that the adult L2 subjects in the previous studies by Guijarro-Fuentes and colleagues were students living in the United Kingdom who had learned Spanish in a classroom setting, but did not live in a full immersion context. In the current study, the L2 speakers are all living in Spain, in a full immersion context.

3. Methodology

The full study consisted of an online survey with three main tasks: a grammaticality judgment task (GT), an elicited production task, and a context-driven grammaticality judgment task (CGT). Here, we report some of the results of the two grammaticality judgment tasks. The survey also included tests for English and Spanish proficiency and a language background questionnaire.

In the GT, subjects were presented with a sentence and asked to judge how natural it sounded on a 5-part Likert scale ranging from “(1) Extremely unnatural” to “(5) Extremely natural.” A sample stimulus, with added gloss, is presented in (5).

- (5) *Busco un marinero que sepa nadar.*
 seek-1SG a sailor who know-3SG-SUBJ swim
 ‘I am looking for a sailor who knows how to swim’
 1. Extremadamente no natural
 2. Un poco no natural
 3. Ni natural ni no natural
 4. Un poco natural
 5. Extremadamente natural

The CGT was similar, except that the test sentence was presented in a context which was designed to favor a certain interpretation. Subjects were asked to judge how adequate the sentence was as a description of the situation, on a 5-part Likert scale ranging from “(1) Completely inadequate” to “(5) Completely adequate.” An example of a context favoring a specific interpretation of the object is given in (6), with a translation in (7).

- (6) Leonardo pierde a su hermana mayor, una monja, en una multitud en el centro comercial. Él le dice al guardia de seguridad:
“Busco una monja.”
 1. Totalmente inadecuado
 2. Más o menos inadecuado
 3. Ni adecuado ni inadecuado
 4. Más o menos adecuado
 5. Totalmente adecuado
- (7) Leonardo loses his older sister, a nun, in a crowd in the mall. He tells the security guard
“I’m looking for a nun.”

There were eleven conditions, of which eight are reported here. The eight conditions reported here had an expected correct response (either with *a* or without *a*), so accuracy could be measured in comparison to that expected answer. The other three conditions (Conditions 4, 8 and 9) did not have an expected correct response, so accuracy could be measured; the results of those three conditions will be reported in a separate paper.

In **Condition 1**, the object was [+animate, +specific], requiring *a*-marking. In **Condition 2**, the object was [+animate, -specific], forbidding *a*-marking (since the verb was atelic in both conditions). These two conditions took advantage of the fact that, in opaque contexts in Spanish, the specificity of a noun phrase with a relative clause can be varied by varying the mood of the relative clause, with an indicative relative clause resulting in a specific noun phrase and a subjunctive relative clause resulting in a non-specific noun phrase. The sentence in (5) is an example of an object which is non-specific due to a subjunctive relative clause (Condition 2). An example of an object which is specific due to an indicative relative clause (Condition 1) is given in (8).

- (8) *Necesitan a una enfermera que pasa la mañana con ellos*
 need-3PL DOM a nurse who pass-3SG-IND the morning with them
 ‘They need a [specific] nurse who will pass the morning with them’

In **Condition 3**, the object was [+animate, +specific] as well as [+topic], requiring *a*-marking. The stimuli in this condition used the clitic left-dislocation construction, in which a left-dislocated object is doubled by a clitic, which has been argued to force a specific reading of the topicalized object (e.g. Borgonovo et al., 2006). This condition was included because it has been argued that apparent specificity effects in DOM are actually a reflex of topicality effects (Leonetti, 2004, 2008). Condition 3 thus provides a contrast to Condition 1, in which the object is specific but not topicalized. The NP objects in this condition were also plural. A sample stimulus is given in (9).

- (9) *A muchos estudiantes, ya los conocía*
 DOM many students already CL know-1SG-IMP
 ‘Many students, I already knew’

In **Condition 5** the object was [+animate, -specific], forbidding *a*-marking. The non-specificity was forced by using bare noun objects, which are obligatorily non-specific in Spanish. In **Condition 6** the object was similarly [+animate, -specific]. In this case, the non-specificity was forced by the use of an existential construction. So, Conditions 5 and 6 tested different grammatical contexts with the same feature specification as Condition 2 regarding animacy and specificity, but both cases correspond to bare (singular/plural) object NPs (i.e. without an overt determiner). Examples are given in (10) and (11).

- (10) *Conozco científicos*
 know-1SG scientists
 ‘I know [non-specific] scientists’
- (11) *Hay niños en el parque*
 There-are children in the park
 ‘There are children in the park’

In **Condition 7**, the object was [-animate, +specific], forbidding *a*-marking due to the [-animate] feature, as in (12).

- (12) *Busco una casa que tiene tres pisos.*
 seek-1sg a house which has three floors
 ‘I am looking for a house with three floors’

In **Condition 10**, the object was [+animate, +specific] like Condition 1, also requiring *a*-marking, but in this case, the object was definite, and thus necessarily specific. An example is given in (13).

- (13) *Necesito a la enfermera estadounidense*
 need-1SG DOM the nurse American
 ‘I need the American nurse’

In **Condition 11**, the object was [+animate, -specific], but the subject was agentive, thus allowing for *a*-marking, as in (3).

Table 1 summarizes the features involved in each condition, and which of the two grammaticality judgment tasks each condition was used in. Unless it is specified above, the NP object was singular and had an indefinite determiner (*un/una*) across conditions.

In each task, subjects were presented with 6 sentences from each condition used in the task: 3 with *a*-marking, and 3 without (i.e. half of the test items were predicted to be ungrammatical, given the expected presence/absence of *a*-marking). Within each task, stimuli were presented in random order, interspersed with unrelated distractor sentences. In the GT, there were 54 stimuli and 28 distractors. In the CGT, there were 48 stimuli and 24 distractors.

Condition	(Object) Features	A-marking?	Tasks
1	[+anim, +spec, -def]	Yes	GT, CGT
2	[+anim, -spec]	No	GT, CGT
3	[+anim, +spec, -def, +top]	Yes	GT, CGT
5	[+anim, -spec]	No	GT
6	[+anim, -spec]	No	GT
7	[-anim, +spec, -def]	No	GT, CGT
10	[+anim, +spec, +def]	Yes	GT, CGT
11	[+anim, -spec]; [+agent] subject	Yes	GT

Table 1: Summary of experimental conditions

The subjects consisted of a control group of native Spanish speakers living in Spain (n=71) and an experimental group of native English speakers who are advanced L2 learners of Spanish living in Spain (n=21). The experimental group was not subdivided by proficiency level, since all but one subject scored at least 40 out of 50 on the cloze test for Spanish proficiency, so the experimental group was uniformly advanced. (The proficiency test was a standard *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera* or *DELE* test consisting of a 30-question multiple choice portion and a 20-question cloze portion. A score of 40-50 is considered advanced, 30-39 intermediate, and 0-29 low on the test.) The L2 subjects had a mean age of 42.7, with a range of 23-64. Their mean length of exposure to Spanish was 25.6 years, with a range of 5-45, and their mean age of onset of exposure to Spanish was 19.7, with a range of 8-28. All but two were first exposed to Spanish after age 12. All the subjects were living in Spain at the time of the study, in a context of full immersion in Spanish.

4. Theories of L2 acquisition

In this study, we consider two competing theories of L2 acquisition: the Interpretability Hypothesis and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis.

The Interpretability Hypothesis (Hawkins & Hattori, 2006; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007) states broadly that the difficulty of acquisition of a feature correlates with its interpretability. That is, according to the Interpretability Hypothesis, interpretable features are not subject to the critical period and are always accessible, while uninterpretable features which are not activated in the L1 are inaccessible past the critical period. Uninterpretable features which are activated in the L1 are accessible past the critical period.

Note that all the features considered in the current study (object animacy, specificity, topicality and definiteness, as well as subject agentivity) are interpretable. The *a*-marking itself is standardly assumed to be a marker of inherent accusative case (Torrego, 1998), which is also interpretable. Furthermore, they are all activated in English – English displays syntactic phenomena which are dependent on all of them. Thus, the Interpretability Hypothesis predicts that the relevant phenomena should be acquirable by adult L2 learners. In particular, given that the subjects are advanced learners, we would expect them to perform close to ceiling on all conditions, in the absence of independent factors (such as the nature of experimental tasks) which might affect their performance. All else being equal, the various interpretable features being considered should be equally easy to acquire.

On the other hand, the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2008, 2009) does not recognize a contrast between interpretable and uninterpretable features with regards to accessibility for L2 acquisition. The Feature Reassembly Hypothesis builds on the idea that the L1 acquisition task consists of selecting from the inventory of possible features, given that any particular language makes use of a subset of those features. However, languages differ not only in which subset of features they select, but how those features are configured, particularly on functional categories. The L2 acquisition task, then, consists largely of reconfiguring (i.e. reassembling) the features of the L1 to reach the L2 configuration. Choi & Lardiere (2006) give the example of question features in English and Korean. They assume that English and Korean both select [Q] and [wh] features (which are perhaps universally selected) but configure them differently: the [wh] feature is assembled with the *wh*-word in English but with a null operator in Spec, C in Korean, and the [Q] feature is on C in English, but on a

morphological particle inflected on the verb in Korean. According to the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, the acquisition task for an English-speaking learner of Korean consists in part of reassembling the [Q] and [wh] features to their configuration in Korean.

The Feature Reassembly Hypothesis predicts that the difficulty of acquisition correlates with the amount of reassembly required. Thus, phenomena involving more complex feature bundles should be more difficult to acquire than those involving simpler feature bundles, in cases where those feature bundles are not instantiated in the same way in the L1.

In this particular case, the features instantiated on the object itself should pose no problem, since features like animacy and specificity are instantiated on objects in English just as they are in Spanish. Thus, no reassembly of those features should be required. However, in the standard analysis of Spanish DOM (Torrego, 1998), the dative preposition *a*, which also functions as the accusative case marker in DOM, is treated as a functional category with a D-feature which attracts the marked direct object to raise overtly. Torrego argues that the marked object raises to Spec, *v*, and explains the semantic properties of DOM in terms of the features encoded in *v* – she takes there to be a D-feature encoding specificity, and a person feature encoding animacy. So, the task of the English-speaking learner is to assemble these features on *v*. Considering the experiment developed here, the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis predicts that conditions involving more complex feature bundles should be more difficult to acquire than those involving simpler feature bundles. If all conditions pattern the same, or if differences between conditions do not correspond to the complexity of the feature bundles involved, the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis will not be supported.

5. Results and discussion

For both experimental tasks, subjects' responses were coded as following: for sentences which were grammatical, a response of 4 or 5 on the Likert scale was counted as correct, while a response of 1-3 was counted as incorrect. For sentences which were ungrammatical, a response of 1 or 2 on the Likert scale was counted as correct, while a response of 3-5 was counted as incorrect. This made the requirements for matching the expected responses stricter. Each subject's accuracy on each condition was then calculated as a percentage of total questions in each condition for each task. For both tasks, U-tests were performed to determine if there was a significant difference in overall accuracy per condition between L1 and L2 subjects.

For the grammaticality judgment task, L2 subjects had significantly lower accuracy than L1 subjects on two of the conditions in Table 1: Condition 1 ($p=0.01$) and Condition 10 ($p<0.005$). In Conditions 2, 5, 6, 7 and 11 there was no significant difference in accuracy between L1 and L2 speakers. L2 speakers approached convergence with L1 speakers on Conditions 5 and 6 ($p=0.85$ and $p=0.84$, respectively). Most surprisingly, L2 subjects had significantly *higher* accuracy than L1 subjects on Condition 3 ($p<0.001$). However, L1 subjects had an average accuracy of just 13% on Condition 3, which strongly suggests that our assumptions about the grammar of clitic left-dislocation are empirically not borne out. Despite the fact that clitic left-dislocation has been argued to force a specific reading of the topicalized object, the L1 speakers in this study strongly rejected *a*-marking of the object in Condition 3. For this reason, we omit Condition 3 from further discussion, but in a future paper (in preparation) we will discuss the grammatical status of *a*-marking with clitic left-dislocation. The results for the grammaticality judgment task are summarized in Table 2.

Note also that, although L2 subjects approached convergence with native speakers on Condition 5, their average accuracy was only 44%. This is because the average accuracy of the L1 subjects on Condition 5 was only 48% (slightly above chance, given that two of the five possible responses, or 40%, were coded as correct). The observation that bare nouns in object position in Spanish must be non-specific seems to be a robust one, so the low accuracy of L1 speakers on this condition is somewhat puzzling. Notice, however, that L1 speakers have a relatively low accuracy on a number of conditions, possibly because of the subtlety of the phenomenon being tested and the length of the experiment.

Condition	Features	<i>A</i> -marking?	Significant difference?	Average L2 accuracy	Average L1 accuracy
1	[+anim, +spec, -def]	Yes	Yes	.44	.52
2	[+anim, -spec]	No	No	.56	.53
3	[+anim, +spec, -def, +top]	Yes	Yes	.49	.13
5	[+anim, -spec]	No	No	.44	.48
6	[+anim, -spec]	No	No	.83	.84
7	[-anim, +spec, -def]	No	No	.69	.78
10	[+anim, +spec, +def]	Yes	Yes	.61	.84
11	[+anim, -spec]; [+agent] subject	Yes	No	.65	.69

Table 2: Results of U-tests for grammaticality judgment task

In the context-driven grammaticality judgment task, L2 subjects had significantly lower accuracy than L1 subjects on all five conditions considered for the CGT in Table 1 (1, 2, 3, 7 and 10; $p < 0.01$ in all cases). Recall, however, the caveat regarding the low accuracy of the L1 speakers in some conditions. Results for the CGT are summarized in Table 3. Notice that the average accuracy taken by itself is somewhat misleading, since the U-test measures the difference in both median and spread between two populations – thus, a U-test can have a significant result when the averages are the same, as in Condition 1 below.

Condition	Features	<i>A</i> -marking?	Significant difference?	Average L2 accuracy	Average L1 accuracy
1	[+anim, +spec, -def]	Yes	Yes	.60	.60
2	[+anim, -spec]	No	Yes	.44	.45
3	[+anim, +spec, -def, +top]	Yes	Yes	.44	.52
7	[-anim, +spec, -def]	No	Yes	.67	.77
10	[+anim, +spec, +def]	Yes	Yes	.52	.75

Table 3: Results of U-tests for context-driven grammaticality judgment task

The first somewhat surprising result to note is that the L2 subjects seemed to have a more difficult time with the CGT than with the GT – they were significantly less accurate than L1 subjects in all conditions in the CGT including two for which there was no significant difference in the GT (Conditions 2 and 7). One possibility is that this was partly due to a combination of fatigue and the complex nature of the task; the CGT was the third of the three tasks in the study, while the GT was the first, so the subjects were almost certainly more tired during the CGT than they were during the GT. Moreover, the task itself is more complicated, since it requires reading and understanding a linguistic background context, and inferring properties of the object such as specificity from the context, rather than simply judging the acceptability of a sentence in isolation. Given the uniformity of the results, the CGT results by themselves do not support the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, especially in the conditions in which *a*-marking is blocked in which arguably there is no difference between the L1 and the L2 in terms of syntactic realization of the relevant features.

Let's further consider the GT results, which present a more varied pattern. Similar to Guijarro-Fuentes (2011, 2012), we find that L2 subjects perform similarly to L1 subjects on some conditions, but not all. One unusual result is the difference between their performance on Conditions 1 and 2. Conditions 1 and 2 are two sides of the same coin – mastery of them should require learners to recognize that both animacy and specificity are necessary conditions for *a*-marking, all else being equal, and we therefore expect that they should perform similarly on the two. A possible explanation for the difference is the fact a correct response in Condition 2 involves rejecting *a*-marking (or accepting a lack of *a*-marking), while a correct response in Condition 1 involves accepting *a*-marking

(or rejecting a lack of *a*-marking). Given that English lacks DOM, there may be an overall tendency for L2 subjects to favor a lack of *a*-marking, which would result in a greater accuracy on Condition 2 than on Condition 1, compatible with our results. Thus, one cannot argue that L2 subjects have really mastered Condition 2, given that their relatively high accuracy can be attributed to transfer from their L1.

What about other conditions where subjects must make reference to both animacy and specificity to determine the presence or absence of *a*-marking? We have already seen that it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from Conditions 1 and 2 alone, but we can also compare Conditions 5, 6 and 10. Again, we see that the L2 subjects do better on the conditions where *a*-marking is disallowed (5 and 6, as opposed to 10), which may be due to their general tendency to favor a lack of *a*-marking. Another possible explanation for their performance on Conditions 5 and 6 may be that the lack of specificity is very clearly signaled in these cases. Since bare noun objects are necessarily non-specific in Spanish (Condition 5), L2 subjects only need to look at the form of the noun phrase to determine that it is non-specific, in contrast to more complex cases where, for instance, they need to look at the mood of the relative clause in an opaque context. In the case of Condition 6, it is not at all surprising that L2 subjects would be highly accurate, since existential constructions never have *a*-marking – the subjects would have never seen *a*-marking after existential *haber* ‘have’, so the mere presence of such a verb is enough to rule out *a*-marking.

An overall point to be made is that the L2 subjects do not provide evidence of having mastered the specificity requirement; if they had, they would perform accurately on Condition 10, just as on Conditions 5 and 6, and also on both conditions 1 and 2 in GT. Several observations are compatible with this overall conclusion. First, the L2 subjects perform well on conditions where both animacy and specificity are required to determine the presence or absence of *a*-marking if the specificity is clearly signaled (5 and 6). Second, the L2 subjects perform well on conditions where the value of the animacy feature alone is sufficient to determine the presence or absence of *a*-marking, independently of specificity (7 and 11). Third, something should be said about the fact L2 subjects show no significant difference from L2 subjects in all four conditions in which *a*-marking is blocked. As indicated above, this pattern could in fact be interpreted as indicative of a mere transfer from the L1, in that English does not show any morphological marking equivalent to DOM.

This pattern is consistent with the predictions of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. Recall that according to Torrego’s analysis, the animacy and specificity requirements are a result of a person feature and a D-feature, respectively, on *v*. The major acquisition task for L2 speakers is then to assemble *v* with those features. If the L2 subjects have successfully configured the person feature, thus mastering the animacy requirement, but not the D-feature, thus not mastering the specificity requirement, then the pattern of results observed in the GT can be explained. It is to be expected that the animacy requirement would be easier to acquire than the specificity requirement. Animacy is determined solely by the meaning of the head noun of the object, whereas specificity can be determined by various factors (the form of the noun phrase in the case of definite DPs, the mood of the relative clause in opaque contexts, and so forth). Moreover, the animacy requirement is, perhaps for related reasons, more frequently explicitly taught in L2 instruction. However, the L2 subjects’ performance on Conditions such as 5, 6, 7 and 11 suggests that they are partway to mastering the specificity requirement as well if mere L1 transfer can be ruled out at least in some cases. A subject-by-subject analysis might reveal that some subjects have completely mastered the specificity requirement, and others not at all. On the other hand, given that the L2 subjects are highly advanced learners, if none of the subjects have completely mastered the specificity requirement, it might support Guijarro-Fuentes’ (2012) adaptation of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, which states that some feature bundles are impossible to acquire.

An alternative possible analysis of the asymmetry between the animacy and specificity requirements involves the Interface Hypothesis (Tsimplici & Sorace, 2006). The Interface Hypothesis distinguishes between core grammatical components (such as syntax, semantics and phonology) and external components (such as pragmatics and discourse), and states that phenomena involving only core grammatical components are easier to acquire than those involving the interface between core and external components. Thus, for example, syntax-semantics interface phenomena should be easier to acquire than syntax-discourse interface phenomena. The Interface Hypothesis could explain why the animacy requirement appears to be easier to acquire than the specificity requirement – animacy is signaled entirely by the form of the object, while specificity is at least partially signaled by the

discourse context. It could also explain why the L2 subjects performed better on the GT overall than on the CGT, since the CGT necessarily involves the syntax-discourse interface. Further work is required to disentangle the predictions of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis and the Interface Hypothesis for our data.

What about the predictions of the Interpretability Hypothesis? Recall that the Interpretability Hypothesis predicts that all the features considered in the current study should be accessible to L2 learners, and so we expect that advanced learners should have uniform mastery of the various conditions. While the observed pattern of results is not incompatible with the Interpretability Hypothesis in that it does not show a lack of distinction between interpretable and uninterpretable features, it is clear that the Interpretability Hypothesis itself has no way to account for the pattern of results. That is, at the very least, the Interpretability Hypothesis has to be supplemented by another hypothesis such as the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis or the Interface Hypothesis to explain the overall differences between the L1 and L2 subjects observed here.

6. Conclusion

We have presented a study of the L2 acquisition of Spanish Differential Object Marking by native English speakers, taking into account a number of semantic features which have been argued to influence DOM, including animacy and specificity of the object and agentivity of the subject. The study has shed light on two competing theories of L2 acquisition, the Interpretability Hypothesis and the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. We have argued that, given Torrego's (1998) analysis of the syntax of Spanish DOM, our results can be explained in terms of the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, but not in terms of the Interpretability Hypothesis. However, we have also suggested that the Interface Hypothesis provides an alternative approach that may explain the observed pattern of data.

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